

Understanding the Impact of the Transnational Promotional Class on Political Communication

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This article is an overture to political communication researchers to broaden their categories and contexts of analysis when assessing the role of promotional practices in political life. It aims to make both methodological and empirical contributions to qualitative political communication research. Drawing on ongoing research into the proliferation of political communication strategies around the exploitation of oil in Canada and the United States, the article analyzes efforts by promotional intermediaries to achieve legitimacy for their clients in three sites: Montreal, Canada; Houston, Texas; and Fort McMurray, Alberta. Bringing to light the tools, techniques, and claims to authority of promotional actors and their practices, the article demonstrates the importance of field research to the analysis of political communication. By getting inside the social worlds of the actors and processes involved, researchers can make sense of the ways that political communication is defined, understood, and acted upon by interlocutors and audiences. The article also addresses specific methodological challenges of undertaking this research.

Keywords: promotional culture, legitimacy, strategic political communication, Keystone

It is those who can exercise influence outside the context of formal proceedings who wield real power. Political influence flows from the employment of resources that shape the beliefs and behavior of others.

—Murray Edelman, *Political Language*, 1977

Taking Promotion Seriously

Political communication researchers are well aware of the thorough promotionalization of their object of study. Undergraduate textbooks of political communication typically feature chapters on spin doctors, image making, and professional hype, debating their impact on the “pictures in our heads” (e.g., Corner & Pels, 2003; Louw, 2010; Rose, 2000; Schill, 2009). That news agendas are managed by strategic communications teams; that politicians’ images are constructed and marketed to the public by

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professional consultants; that politics and public opinion are packaged for media consumption; that pseudo-events and spectacle dominate modern-day governance—these phenomena are seen by researchers as endemic to today's mediatised liberal-democratic politics. But the diffusion of strategic political communication into spheres of influence outside formal political settings requires a new and sharper set of tools to excavate and analyze its effects. Critical approaches to promotional practices in politics need to look beyond conventional contexts and categories of political exchange to address their broader implications.

As the use of promotional tools, techniques, and expertise has become more prevalent in political practice, different schools of thought have emerged to explain and classify this phenomenon. One body of scholarship tends to see promotion and promoters as a regrettable symptom of the professionalization of political communication (e.g., Blumler, 1997; Holtz-Bacha, Negrine, Mancini, & Papathanassopoulos, 2007; Mayhew, 1997; Negrine, 2008):

an ongoing process where structures and practices are continually revised and updated to make them more "rational" and more "appropriate" for the conduct of politics at any particular moment of time . . . a process of continual self-improvement and change towards what is deemed a "better" way of doing things. (Negrine, 2008, pp. 2–3)

Such negative assessments of professionalized political communication focus on its tendency to embrace short-term results and populism as well as its increasing specialization and differentiation, requiring the hiring of intermediaries such as public relations experts, consultants, media managers, and image specialists. The work of these promoters is understood to transform political communication into a rationalized, manipulative force that denigrates the quality and character of political discourse and leads to narrowcasting, "hyperpluralism" (Mayhew, 1997), and fragmentation, separating electoral politics from governance and excluding citizens from public debate. The putative objective of promotional work is to legitimize political decisions and encourage the flow of information among interested parties. In practice, however, "current processes of professionalization emphasize the democracy of representatives, not the democracy of citizens" (Hamelink, 2007, p. 181). These charges generally form part of a broader critique of the commercialization of political life, and the unfortunate conversion of citizens into targeted consumers, both of which compromise the free, transparent, and inclusive flows of information required for processes of democracy.

A second body of work, typically labeled political marketing (a subdiscipline of mainstream marketing, with cognate fields of political public relations, deliberative marketing, and market- or voter-oriented communication) is more attuned to the administrative potential of promotional tools, techniques, and expertise in political life.² Rather than opposing marketing methods to democratic norms, political marketing adopts a determined pragmatism, arguing that marketing literacy can allow political decision makers to form stronger ties to their publics in the pursuit of participatory or collaborative models of decision making, transparency, and accountability (e.g., Henneberg, Scammell, & O'Shaughnessy, 2009; Lees-Marshment, 2011, 2012, 2014; Newman & Verčič, 2002; Scammell, 2014). To this end, political

² There are some definitional discrepancies within the field; see Henneberg et al. (2009).

marketing research is predicated on identifying best practices in everyday political activities such as voter profiling and polling, internal marketing and management, candidate or policy branding, and reputation management, then finding ways to deploy these practices to enhance democratic norms.

Despite the overlap in research objects, approaches, and contexts, an ongoing limitation to these two areas of work is the relative lack of disciplinary or research interaction across them.³ This has left both sides bereft of key insights from the other side of the fence. In some regards, the “realist” philosophy, grounded empiricism, and practitioner orientation of some political marketing research can provide social scientists with insights about what goes on behind the scenes of political decisions. Moreover, recent research in this area, in an effort to build a metatheoretical framework, has sought to extend Kotler and Levy’s (1969) prescient claim that marketing functions can be broadened to productively apply to ongoing practices in multiple organizational settings and spheres of social, economic, and cultural life (e.g., Henneberg, 2008). Whether one agrees with this claim, its point is that political contests are not defined solely by what goes on in parties and elections; rather, in the current information environment, political parties, social movements, policy advocates, citizen organizations, governments, and corporate interests all make use of political communication as a strategic resource in a wide range of settings (Manheim, 2011). Manheim distinguishes political communication from *strategic* political communication along these lines:

If we think of political communication as encompassing the creation, distribution, control, use, processing and effects of information as a political resource, whether by governments, organizations, groups, or individuals, we can characterize *strategic* political communication as the purposeful management of such information to achieve a stated objective based on a sophisticated knowledge of underlying attributes and tendencies of people and institutions—which is to say, based on the science of individual, organizational, and governmental decision-making—and of the uses and effects of communication as a means of influencing them. (Manheim, 2011, p. ix)

Based on this definition, it is not at all surprising that the tools, techniques, and expertise of promotional industries such as advertising, branding, market research, management consultancy, and public relations have become central to political communication. Since at least 1935, when Paul Lazarsfeld developed “the art of asking why” in the preparation of market surveys (1935, p. 26), these industries have focused closely on developing a repertoire of knowledge about the habits and motivations of people and institutions in order to formulate a (quasi-) science of decision making. What is more, professional promoters (what Mayhew [1997, p. 110] calls “influence entrepreneurs”) have long had a vested interest in demonstrating the value of their work to the public, and to do so, they have sought to “create legitimating frames consistent with the informational ideals of civic culture” (Mayhew, 1997, p. 195).

³ This statement needs qualification: Although some political marketing, partly in an effort to gain legitimacy for itself, has engaged with theoretical and conceptual frameworks in political science and critical-cultural communication, the reverse is only rarely true (see Henneberg, 2004, 2008).

In other words, the primary objective of promotional intermediaries is to achieve legitimacy for their political clients by demonstrating the cultural congruence of political actors, actions, and institutions with their intended audience. Since “audiences perceive the legitimate organization not only as more worthy, but also as more meaningful, more predictable, and more *trustworthy*” (Suchman, 1995, p. 575), the pursuit of legitimacy is paramount to political campaigns and everyday governance; and the use of promotional practices and agents—a group I have elsewhere called a transnational promotional class (Aronczyk, 2013)—to achieve legitimacy is basic to this enterprise. As Scammell (2014, p. 36) argues, “it *matters* what professionals think they are doing,” not because they are the best interpreters of contemporary political contexts, but because understanding their self-perceptions, standards, and approaches can help us understand how political legitimacy is construed and constructed.

At the same time, critical accounts of sweeping transformations in political and civic life need to be made more central to industrial and administrative accounts to help social science researchers take this scholarship more seriously. The application of marketing principles, tactics, and expertise to aspects of the democratic process can generate legitimacy in ways that distort normative ideals of deliberative democracy. These ideals include “a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes” (Habermas, 2006, p. 413). If we consider, for instance, the legally sanctioned interpenetration of corporate and political agendas, historically unprecedented wealth disparities between the lifestyles of political elites and those of their constituents, the extreme partisanship of media outlets, and the hypercommercialization of online spaces, it is hard to reconcile these ideals.

This latter point not only underscores the need for a rigorous critical approach to promotional political communication; it also signals the need to consider how contemporary politics takes place in a promotional *culture*: an environment in which everyday communication—by professionals and ordinary citizens—has the propensity to assume a promotional character (Arvidsson, 2006; Wernick, 1991). If indeed the primary challenge facing political communication research today is to develop methods and tools of analysis that are better suited to citizens’ ordinary experience of media and politics (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), then we need to look more carefully at the formats, features, and tactics of the promotional register and how these interact with media, politics, and everyday life.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

This article is an overture to political communication researchers to broaden their categories and contexts of analysis when assessing the role of promotional practices in political life. It aims to make both methodological and empirical contributions to qualitative political communication research. My empirical case is a three-year investigation into the proliferation of political communication strategies around the exploitation of oil in Canada (i.e., the Athabasca tar sands) and the United States (i.e., the planned Keystone XL Pipeline, which would import the tar sands oil). I focus on strategies of legitimacy used by various actors to build support for the pipeline’s construction and use, paying close attention to the ways that promotional actors have sought to attain legitimacy not only by matching the value of their message to the ideals of civic life but by embedding logics and mechanisms of promotion directly into institutions and practices of civil society.

Although there are millions of miles of oil and natural gas pipelines crisscrossing North America, the Keystone has become a lightning rod for the legitimacy contest under way among energy industrialists, government, business interests, and activists. Communications around the pipeline are no longer solely about the pipeline but rather condense broader political debates about climate change, electoral campaign funding, legislative changes, media advocacy, and partisanship. This case is therefore paradigmatic for understanding the current range and scope of promotional work as well as its major political implications.

A rich data source for this empirical case resides in the professional, business and trade materials developed by and for industry actors, such as industry reports, public relations handbooks, media management briefs, and corporate branding literature, regularly overlooked by critical scholars because of the false but persistent belief that this material is not worthy of serious consideration. My research considers specific legitimating devices: polls, maps, public relations tactics, advertising campaigns, magazine features, environmental impact reports, and other communications ephemera that bring the Keystone XL Pipeline into being in a particular way.

My methodological objective is to carve out a space for the critical study of industry that takes seriously claims made from within the industry and that attempts to get inside the social worlds of the actors and processes involved. This approach reflects the call by Karpf, Kreiss, and Nielsen (2014) for a "new era" of field research that includes "firsthand observation, participation, and interviewing in the actual contexts where political communication occurs" (p. 44). I draw on fieldwork conducted in the spring and summer of 2014 at three sites: Montreal, Canada; Houston, Texas; and Fort McMurray, Alberta. In Montreal, I attended Petrocultures, a conference that assembled North American industrialists, academics, and activists to debate political and economic controversies around oil and energy. In Houston, I participated in the two-day Energy Digital Summit, billed as an event "to help marketers in the oil and gas industry understand how to integrate social platforms and media into their marketing strategies." As a registered conference-goer, I watched representatives from social media companies (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn), strategic consulting firms (e.g., Edelman, Ernst & Young), and oil concerns (e.g., Shell, American Petroleum Institute) make PowerPoint presentations; chatted informally with industry recruiters, branding experts, and public relations specialists; and collected handouts, flyers, and fact sheets provided at the event. In Fort McMurray, a notorious boom town located next to the largest oil sands deposit in the world, I participated in tours of oil sands mines and refineries, observed visitors and collected materials at mining sites and tourism facilities, and conducted informal interviews with oil sands employees. Finally, I examine the content of actual political campaigns by various actors invested in promoting the construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline, both government-oriented campaigns and those aimed at the general public.

In the next section, I describe the rise and consolidation of a transnational promotional class, with specific reference to the environmental sector in North America. The cross-border impact of the pipeline allows us to observe the harmonization (or lack thereof) of communicative strategies in this transnational class. I then offer some observations from ongoing fieldwork. I close with an analysis of these observations and a discussion of some methodological challenges and opportunities posed by this kind of political communication research.

The Transnational Promotional Class and the Pursuit of Legitimacy

Raymond Williams' classic essay, "Advertising: The Magic System" (1980), details the historical transformation of advertising (and, to a certain extent, cognate professions such as public relations) from the promotional puffery used to sell snake oil to an organized system of selling and persuasion—one that would come to occupy a central role in the economy as well as in civic life. Already in the mid-19th century, advertisers sought to reinforce the rational nature of their work, which was to design effective communication about a given product that would provide mutual benefit to consumer and producer. Mayhew (1997) locates the American origins of modern advertising as a legitimate system of bounded rationality in the Federal Trade Commission hearings of 1971, in which corporate executives testified about the relevance and value of their practice to society to (successfully) prevent regulations that would limit the scope of the industry.

If the history of advertising can be understood as the gradual acceptance of the profession as a legitimate provider of rational inducements to decision making in the market—and eventually beyond the market into the political sphere—this history also must be considered in terms of advertising's ability to introduce interpretive, cultural, and psychological factors into its legitimating process. This is what Williams means by "magic": "a cultural pattern in which the objects are not enough but must be validated, if only in fantasy, by association with social and personal meanings" (Williams, 1980, p. 335; see also Lears, 1994). All promotional industries work according to this principle of cognitive legitimacy: the use of persuasive tools, language, and symbols to achieve social and cultural "comprehensibility" or "taken-for-grantedness" (Suchman, 1995; see also Edelman, 1977, 1964/1985). As Suchman (1995) explains, the process of achieving cognitive legitimacy is complex. Because legitimacy is socially constructed, it relies not merely on an actor's or organization's parole and persistence but also on the dynamics of collective action: "In the cognitive realm, such collective action usually takes the form of either *popularization* (promoting comprehensibility by explicating new cultural formations) or *standardization* (promoting taken-for-grantedness by encouraging isomorphism)" (p. 592).

Popularization, Suchman argues, is best achieved by the articulation of "stories" which demonstrate the "reality" of a given perspective—a practice used to great effect in advertising as well as in public relations, lobbying, and litigation (pp. 592–593). Achieving standardization consists of convincing similar groups to adopt given patterns, through either "modeling," "coercion," or "regulation" (p. 593).

It is in this context that we can understand the rise and consolidation of a transnational promotional class (TPC). The features of the "third age" of political communication (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) foster the employ of intermediaries such as lobbyists, consultants, public relations practitioners, and marketers to strategically broker communication between political figures and their publics. These promotional elites professionalize, mediatize, and manage the process of political communication and policy making. They do not form a self-consciously composed collective entity but rather operate as a loosely affiliated coalition of actors and institutions who are dedicated to constructing and managing international and domestic public opinion as well as the conditions in which public attitudes and values are sought and collected.

A major issue that arises in the context of the TPC's participation in politics is that of representation versus accountability. Members of the TPC represent their clients' interests and pursue knowledge and information that serve these interests. But these prolocutors seek a decentered and nonhierarchical position for themselves. Constituting their role as one of circulation, evaluation, mediation, translation, promotion, and calculation, these actors place themselves at a remove. A detailed review of the output of this class reveals their marked preference to present themselves as conduits, facilitators, guides, intermediaries, strategists, managers—in short, as unaccountable for the political impact of their work. A central paradox of the TPC therefore exists between their professional agenda to increase the transparency, trust, and legitimacy of their clients' activities in political and public spheres and their ability to remain opaque about their own methods and practices. This has major implications for the knowledge practices and concepts that structure democratic political life. Consider, for instance, the concept of public opinion. Though we know that the pursuit of public opinion has become an industry unto itself, constructed by professional surrogates and dependent on multiple variables—their clients and audiences, the types of questions asked, the frames provided, and the political objectives of the polling (Herbst, 1998; Lewis, 2001; Miller, 1995)—researchers persist in using this category as a means to assess the actions of voting constituencies. I will describe some specific methodological challenges that arise from this issue later in the article.

This brief historical portrait forms the backdrop to the rise of transnational "corporate activism" around the environmental movement. At the same time as the Federal Trade Commission hearings over the legitimacy of the advertising industry were taking place, new business tactics were being implemented to further embed the corporate sector into civil society. The 1960s had seen major successes by the environmental movement in influencing governments to adopt regulations and legislation protecting air, water, and land (Beder, 2002; Rowell, 1996). Such laws and regulations would have a major impact on corporate activity. In retaliation, corporations sought to actively create coalitions, associations, and other institutions that would offset the achievements of the environmental movement by engaging directly in the political process. Beder (2002) lists several institutions and practices that formed part of this new "information industry" beginning in the 1970s and 1980s:

- the creation of departments of public affairs and government relations within corporations;
- the invention of public interest lawyers;
- the massive rise in numbers of business lobbyists;
- the growth or reorientation of business coalitions and trade associations (e.g., the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Business Roundtable, the Small Business Legislative Council);
- the formation of conservative foundations and think tanks;
- corporate sponsorship of public events and organizations;
- corporate sponsorship of educational programs and media in schools, places of employment, and on public access television;
- endowed chairs, sponsored courses and research, and other funding channels to universities and high schools (pp. 16–22).

A major undertaking of this assemblage of political persuasion was clearly to *popularize* and *standardize* a business perspective among both political decision makers and the general public. By proliferating the means and targets of communication while narrowing the content, the aim was to drown out the voice of the environmental movement. As the multinational public relations firm Edelman puts it, the goal is to “increase the likelihood of stakeholders hearing stories three to five times, the number of times needed for most stakeholders to believe information to be true” (Edelman, 2014, p. 7).

In the second wave of corporate activism in the 1990s, the process of standardization took on new meaning. As public awareness of climate change and other deleterious effects of corporate activity grew, corporate brands were increasingly challenged to maintain their legitimacy and protect their reputation. The “cultural turn of the corporation” (Schulz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000) involved increased emphasis on the concept of corporate citizenship, through the adoption of corporate social responsibility initiatives and emphasis on the “triple bottom line” (accounting for social and environmental assets as well as economic ones; see Vogel, 2005). In the environmental sector, additional tactics by companies involved hiring well-known environmental activists as spokespeople; donating funds to environmental groups; and emulating activists’ tactics such as orchestrating protests and boycotts in an attempt to penetrate, and ultimately discredit, the movement (Austin, 2002; Manheim, 2011; Rowell, 1996). This form of standardization—achieved by modeling activist behavior—was cynical and hypocritical, supplemented as it was by coercive measures toward standardization: Corporate lobbies fought in the political sphere for legislation and regulatory changes designed to further disengage political and public perceptions of environmentalists (e.g., Cable, Shriver, & Hastings, 1999; Shriver, Adams, & Cable, 2013).

A third set of standardization measures adopted by corporate and related political interests is further indicative of the ultimate intention. This is the creation of coalitions, interest groups, and other associations of individuals “who can publicly promote the outcomes desired by the corporation whilst claiming to represent the public interest” (Beder, 2002, p. 27). Rather than attempts to “institutionalize sincerity” (Mayhew, 1997, p. 123) to maintain the reputation of the firm, a recent pattern has been to foster trust in a more decentralized way, by mobilizing third-party actors, including ordinary citizens, as mouthpieces for relations with publics, media, and government. Such “privatization of participation” (Lee, McQuarrie, & Walker, 2015; Walker, 2009, 2014) is enabled by the TPC, including public relations agencies, brand consultancies, and grassroots lobbying firms that work for political operatives. It makes use of concepts of “consumer co-creation,” “word of mouth,” and other tactics devised in corporate settings (Serazio, 2014) that use ordinary individuals as promotional intermediaries for political interests. Such strategic campaigns “transcend conventional political modes such as PR and lobbying by fully integrating image (e.g., ads, PR events, news story placement, editorials) and power (e.g., judicial, regulatory, legislative, protest, boycott) tactics to advance partisan causes and damage vulnerable opponents” (Bennett & Manheim, 2001, p. 285). Although some theorists have seen strategic political communication as reinforcing passivity and cynicism among publics tired of political spin, it seems that the most recent wave of corporate activism focuses on creating a more active and interactive public, albeit one that is subverted through political operatives’ adoption of the mechanisms and logics of participation for alternative ends.

Notes from the Field

Pipelines and their contents have long been not only materially but also cognitively subterranean. In the last 20 years, however, pipelines have been excavated in the popular imagination as symbols of environmental degradation and industrial overreach. One reason for the growing public awareness and organized opposition in North America is the nationalization and transnationalization of Canada's growing oil sands resource, which would be transported into refineries in the United States via TransCanada Corporation's proposed Keystone XL Pipeline.

In the context of growing publicity and resistance, the perceived need by industry supporters to achieve cultural congruence between the pipeline and the public is paramount. This was made especially clear in presentations and handouts featured at the Energy Digital Summit in Houston. One focus was on the attainment of a "social license" by industry players. Over and above the regulatory licenses to operate that are required by oil companies to explore for and produce petroleum, attaining a social license—public acceptance or approval to do business—is considered equally necessary in the current context of what one Hill & Knowlton executive describes as "the age of distrust," at least in part because "the more professionally political ideals are promoted, the more manifest the political hypocrisy" (Hamelink, 2007). Insofar as a social license might well require a widespread shift in beliefs and behaviors, multiple types of constituencies need to be reached and multiple channels of communication engaged. For this reason, industry actors typically organize strategic plans to reach different stakeholders simultaneously, identifying and mobilizing the services of third-party actors who can speak on behalf of the political objective: employees, citizens, academics, industry trade groups, nongovernmental organizations, local communities, media outlets, government, technical experts, regulators, and political decision makers.

Behind the rationale for the use of third-party agents to promote oil companies' concerns is the growing belief that business, not government leaders, should take the reins in fostering political change. As Edelman's chief executive officer observed in the executive summary of his company's most recent Trust Barometer report,

Our research shows clearly there is an opportunity for business to make its case for change, as 79 percent believe business should be involved in formulating regulation in such industries as energy and food, while a majority feels government cannot go it alone. Eighty-four percent of respondents believe that business can pursue its self-interest while doing good work for society. This is, in fact, the license to lead, beyond the legal construct of license to operate, toward a new role of initiating change. (Edelman, 2014, p. 1)

The Edelman Trust Barometer is an annual survey, conducted since 2001, of thousands of respondents around the world to solicit public opinion on perceived confidence in industries, institutions, and countries. The survey is a lucrative product for the firm, used as both a management model for existing clients and a promotional device to win additional business. In recent years, the barometer has been expanded to include sector-specific analyses. Attendees at the Houston conference were provided with a thumb drive containing findings for the U.S. energy industry. One important finding, which was also

highlighted in Edelman executives' conference presentations, was that although 68% of North American respondents believed that "the energy industry should be a more active participant in the broader debate over U.S. energy policy," company employees and "activist consumers" were deemed more highly trusted "influencers" to communicate certain topics about energy, such as whether the industry addresses societal needs.

The American Petroleum Institute (API), the main trade association and lobbyist for the industry, was a major sponsor of the Energy Digital Summit. It is also a major client of Edelman, and it was during a lunchtime presentation that we learned about how Edelman's counsel was put into practice, via API's initiatives to rally both employees and "activist consumers" to the energy cause. Energy Nation is a "grassroots" organization created by API whose objective is to "motivate" an oil company's employees to "act on behalf of energy." Actions include writing letters to Congress and to the president to show support for the Keystone project; mobilizing support around elections; engaging in fund-raising; circulating API-authored flyers and "fact sheets to combat misinformation"; and other actions that will help to influence legislation. Both TransCanada and the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers make use of employees in their advertising campaigns.⁴ Explaining the basis of this strategy, one marketing specialist told me, "It's easy to attack a corporation. It's hard to attack a person you see every day."

Energy Nation's sister organization, Energy Citizens, is targeted to the "activist consumer." In 2009, Energy Citizens coordinated a series of public rallies in nearly 20 states across the United States, the objective being, as the president of API put it, "to put a human face on the impacts of unsound energy policy and to aim a loud message at those states' U.S. senators to avoid the mistakes embodied in the House climate bill and the Obama Administration's tax increases on our industry" (J. Gerard, e-mail from API to its membership, August 2009; see also Fahrenthold, 2009). Company leaders were also asked to recruit employees, vendors, suppliers, contractors, retirees, "and others who have an interest in our success" to participate in the rallies. Energy Citizens coordinators created advertising campaigns with the theme, "I'm an Energy Voter," enlisting constituents through a "casting call" to appear in the television spots.

Such efforts harness legitimacy by spinning trust itself. And as trust is rationalized, made measurable, and monitored, notions of public opinion are commodified and distorted to serve pragmatic political ends. When the TPC turns to individual citizens as the *source* of trust, citizens themselves become the medium of the message. In this sense, my observations correspond to those of Lee, McNulty, and Shaffer (2015), who write about the "public deliberation industry"—nonprofits and public consulting organizations that produce public deliberation processes for clients who want to engage their stakeholders in productive dialogue. In "the private pursuit of political authenticity" (p. 28), the authors suggest, "the discourses invoked by practitioners as protecting the civic spirit of deliberation are in fact critical to the marketing of deliberation" (p. 34).

⁴ See, for instance, CAPP's Oil Sands Today campaign (oilsandstoday.ca) and TransCanada's campaign featuring local employees (blog.transcanada.com/meet-our-nebraska-staff).

Another set of third-party advocates, or “force multipliers” (Manheim, 2011, p. 88), are targeted members of the community. Although open house or town hall-style meetings are now seen as loss leaders because of the risk that speakers may lose control of the conversation, “community mapping” or “influencer message mapping” to convene small-group discussions or “workshops” with relatively homogeneous groups (e.g., aboriginal groups, academics, environmental activists) are now the norm. These events then provide substantial promotional fodder (e.g., photographs of or statements by community leaders; opinion formation; monitoring of dissent) for other campaigns.

In addition to promoting buy-in among these community members, outreach efforts such as these help industry players identify potential advocates. As one consultant put it, the tactic is to “find the ‘mommy bloggers’ of the energy sector” and let them proselytize on behalf of the industry. Although this is also achieved through surrogacy—as when apparently amateur blogs or posts turn out to be authored and funded by large companies—in other cases, ordinary citizens take up the charge.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) achieves its social license through various “partnerships.” One is with the media conglomerate Postmedia Network, the largest English-language news publisher in Canada. The partnership goes beyond the traditional public relations techniques of ad placement and press releases into editorial decisions about content and story placement. As the *National Post* publisher, Douglas Kelly, wrote for a CAPP presentation to the Postmedia board in 2013:

We will work with CAPP to amplify our energy mandate and to be a part of the solution to keep Canada competitive in the global marketplace. The *National Post* will undertake to leverage all means editorially, technically and creatively to further this critical conversation. (CAPP, 2013)

These means include so-called Joint Ventures, with “topics to be directed by CAPP and written by Postmedia”; special newspaper sections on the industry; cobranded advertisements; and the use of Postmedia’s tracking and monitoring service to “measure content in real-time across our brands and use that data to inform strategic shifts to meet campaign goals.” The impressions and click-throughs to CAPP websites measured by Postmedia were then used as promotional material for the association’s member newsletter and in public communications. The historical interaction of public relations and journalistic practices in North American news production has received some attention (Cutlip, 1994; Gandy, 1982; Gower, 2007), but neither institutional nor cultural critiques explain how to account for and evaluate the interpenetration of these fields suggested by such “Joint Ventures.”

As discussed above, storytelling is a central aspect of legitimacy building in promotional campaigns (Manheim, 2011; Suchman, 1995). Storytelling has several functions: It aims to combine “fact-based” messaging with emotional resonance; it establishes relevance and context for targeted constituencies; it simplifies complex issues and fosters black-and-white frames that can be reduced to expressions of assent or dissent (e.g., “Do you support oil sands or not?”); and it can be locally adapted to respond to site-specific concerns. At Petrocultures, an industry/academic/activist conference in Montreal, the vice president of communications at the Canadian oil company Cenovus outlined its publicity

campaign, "More Than Fuel," which presents good-news stories about the benefits of petroleum-based products. As she explained to *PR Week*, "Pregnancy and birth, the challenge to the human spirit, the power of a young person's ideas—these are some of the themes in the Cenovus ads. The message is that oil plays a role in the things we value" (Stastny, 2013, p. 24).

Storytelling is also valuable for its ability to present a tightly controlled message that excludes alternative perspectives. The coordinator for external affairs for an oil company calls people who produce contentious or oppositional messages about the company "trolls" (opposition is "trolling"). Her advice: delete or ignore ("don't feed the trolls"). Another tactic she uses are "workarounds," or what Freudenberg and Alario (2007) call "diversionary reframing": If the mainstream media is unresponsive to attempts by the company to carry its pro-industry messages, "start a blog and promote your \$2.5 million donation to a college in Susquehanna county."

Storytelling is a central feature of the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, Alberta, an industry- and government-sponsored "educational facility" designed to promote "energy literacy," a common phrase in industry reports and presentations. Underlying the strategy of energy literacy is a prevailing belief that, as the vice president of external relations at an oil pipeline association explained, "the value of the pipeline industry is not clearly understood and appreciated" and that "the more you are familiar with pipelines, the more likely you will be in support of the industry." Presenting the problem as one of knowledge deficiency, the goal becomes one of education and rehabilitation to train the public and political decision makers so they can make the obvious decisions.

At the Discovery Centre, one can watch live demonstrations of oil being extracted from the tar sands, "drive" bucket trucks, and take home samples. There are ongoing public and children's programs, including summer camps. Two films, *Quest for Energy* and *Pay Dirt*, are screened on a continuous basis, summarizing the narrative espoused by the Discovery Centre's sponsors: a narrative of scientific and technological mastery over nature combined with a moral obligation to produce and refine oil for the needs of human consumption.

Methodological Challenges

There are at least three major challenges to political communication research posed by this sponsored version of legitimacy making.

First and perhaps most obvious among these are limitations of funds. The massive sums of money, reams of industrial research, and mobilization of other crucial material and symbolic resources devoted to the promotion of oil are not met by an equal aggregation and impact of critical scholarship. The political economic term "resource curse" typically refers to the condition of countries whose abundance of natural resources distorts the balance of political power. In this paradigm, the resource curse is the lack of scholarly resources to participate in events and contexts that would allow for the evaluation and assessment of politics around oil, which can scarcely hope to approximate those devoted to the information and influence campaigns of industry and government. To give an anecdotal example: The CI Energy Group is an event management organization that has hosted an annual conference for public

relations experts working in the Canadian energy industry since 2012. Registration fees for this two-day event start at CA\$2,095. The cost to participate in the live webcast is \$1,595. Because I did not have funding to attend this industry conference, I attempted to contact the organizers to obtain general information about the presenters so I could contact them directly. I was hung up on three times and redirected to voice mail three more times. No one returned my calls. One and a half years later, a research grant from my home institution allowed me to purchase presenters' archived PowerPoint slides for CA\$495. From this partial and fragmented information I have tried to reconstruct the arguments by contacting presenters and cross-referencing their responses with those of other attendees. Critical research in this area that tries to go beyond publicly available content toward more robust analyses must therefore find creative and innovative means to access data.

Second, and more problematic, is the lack of transparency wrought by the promotional agents engaged in this industry. In this context, certain kinds of research methods are problematic. Social network analysis, for instance, is of limited value, because

the group structure of the new pluralism is often a symbolic construction. Many of the consumer, citizen, and public interest groups, alliances, and coalitions prominently featured in communication campaigns are virtual organizations that exist primarily . . . on letterheads, on the Internet, or as offices within other, well known organizations whose partisanship is well established. (Bennett & Manheim, 2001, p. 294)

Network analysis is also hampered in a context where, despite the appearance of participation by multiple actors, the formation of front groups, shadow lobby groups, and other third-party tactics of engagement and mobilization preclude the notion of equality suggested by the network metaphor (Roelofs, 2009).

Lack of transparency extends to forms of concealment. I have described the ability of the TPC to appear at arm's length from the political process even as its members participate directly in it. This is true not just in terms of appearance but also in terms of disclosure. Promotional actors are not subject to the same administrative rules and regulations as their political clients. For example, the multinational public relations firm Edelman works extensively with clients in the oil and gas industry to promote regulatory and legislative change in U.S. environmental policy. Because much of its work for this sector has involved enlisting third-party actors to act on its clients' behalf (what Edelman calls "grassroots advocacy"), the firm has not been required to register as a lobbying firm since 2006. Activities such as grassroots advocacy are not part of the formal definition of the Lobbying Disclosure Act (Fang, 2014; see also Silverstein, 2014).

A second form of concealment, equally important to legitimacy building, is the dissimulation of viewpoints considered antithetical to the cause. This can consist in exclusions of groups, choices not made (such as links that do not appear on websites), and choices not made *public*: unspecified alliances or working arrangements; documents that do not circulate; or concealed funding sources, for example. The disappearance, diversion, and/or misdirection of noncorresponding views are themselves a form of "magic" (Freudenberg & Alario, 2007). By hiding the sources of political mobilization and the ideological tenets of this mobilization, grassroots consultancies seek to enforce existing structures of authority while

maintaining patterns of inequality (Lee et al., 2015). If, as Davidson and Gismondi (2011) write, "One main effect of political discourse, in addition to the promotion of both its own authority and the ideologies espoused, is to conceal and discount the inequities and irrationalities endorsed by state and ideology alike" (p. 7), the promotion of political discourse via public participation makes citizens into the medium for their own disenfranchisement.

These features of the TPC remind us that strategic communication is equally about strategic *absences* of communication, whether through the situations mentioned above or through denial or silence (Edelman, 2001; Norgaard, 2011; Zerubavel, 2006.⁵ Examining several studies about the relationships between business sources and media coverage, Davis finds that "corporate public relations appears to have best served businesses by *restricting* reporter access and information—not by promoting company views" (Davis, 2002, p. 55, my emphasis). Ericson et al. (1989) put it well: "For the private corporation, power over the news is power to stay out of the news" (quoted in Davis, 2002, p. 55). This logic clearly extends to corporations' political influence as well.

Here the methodological challenge is to find ways to account for such deliberate elisions, gaps, and unmarked categories. At issue is the construction of social and political realities. For instance, the scientific "reality" of climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, to which oil sands extraction and refinement would contribute, is not represented as such in political communication around the issue. Rather, scientific evidence appears as a contested discourse that is mobilized by different groups to make various knowledge claims, some for and some against oil exploitation and pipeline construction. The "reality" of empirical evidence (i.e., accumulated international scientific knowledge represented in reports such as those prepared by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which documents anthropogenic causes of greenhouse gas emissions) is, therefore, not a common denominator for political communication. This has meant that political, economic, cultural, and ecological problems of oil have become problems of *communication* specifically, where the "best" viewpoints, decisions, and societal changes are presented as outcomes of strategic efforts that win the favors of influential audiences.

A third challenge is related to the sociotechnical context in which political communication takes place (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Against the popular view that newer information and communication technologies have leveled the playing field of political discourse by enabling minority publics and promoting multiple viewpoints, there are several indications that newer media have, rather, reinforced the strategic objectives of promotional intermediaries (Hindman, 2008; Howard, 2006; Kreiss & Howard, 2010; Pariser, 2012; Serazio, 2014) using practices such as data mining and microtargeting, software development and search engine optimization, social media marketing and online monitoring, and reputation management.⁶ Here, too, strategically hidden forms of communication such as "dark sites" (prebuilt, just-in-case websites that are not displayed to the public unless needed for crisis response) are promoted to oil companies; consider also the many forms of politically useful data about individual citizens

⁵ I am grateful to Tim Wood for his insights on this topic.

⁶ One Houston conference participant contacted me on his own initiative after the event to share his social media strategies, including monitoring competitors and dissent, hijacking top posts, and promotion via sponsorship.

that are tracked and collected, largely without their knowledge, for so-called digital advocacy (Howard, 2006; Turow, 2011) or control of opponents (Uldam, 2014). Gaining access to these often proprietary ICT tactics and data poses obvious challenges to critical research and reinforces the other limitations mentioned above. Uldam's (2014) case is particularly interesting: As a climate justice activist, she was able to obtain e-mails and other documents critical of oil companies; however, as she acknowledges, key information in the texts she obtained was heavily redacted; and, as a participant researcher, issues of ethical commitment and political alliance came to the fore.

Conclusion

Political participation symbolizes influence for the powerless, but it is also a key device for social control. In consequence, liberals, radicals, and authoritarians all favor participation, a tribute to the terms' symbolic potency and semantic hollowness. . . . When bargaining resources are equal, participation produces real influence on who gets what. When they are strikingly unequal, as is almost always the case, participation becomes a *symbol* of influence that encourages quiescence, rather than substantive gains. (Edelman, 1977, p. 120)

If 40 years ago Murray Edelman could level the charge that actually existing democratic resources are substantially unequal, this condition has only been reinforced by recent waves of corporate-political activism, digital advocacy, and the marketing of deliberation and participation. On the other hand, that Edelman could write this in 1977 suggests that the potential for cherished categories of political analysis to shift and even become unrecognizable is not limited to developments in new media, new norms of engagement, or even necessarily to contemporary contexts of political hypocrisy or partisanship. The notion of a nonpromotional political sphere, even as an ideal type, is no longer useful (if indeed it ever was); it leads to normative arguments about transparent communication as a necessary precondition for democracy and participation in civic life without specifying what is meant by transparency and why this is a positive.

One problem raised by the current situation, as we have seen, is the ongoing struggle to define what political communication actually means in the contemporary context. As Karpf et al. (2014) point out, "Much of contemporary political communication research . . . reifies its object of analysis through deductive designs that proceed from assumed, stable categories of social life" (p. 48)—what Appadurai (1996) has called, in a different context, "categorical treachery" (p. 154). We need to expand our conceptual categories as well as our categories of analysis, redefining the boundaries of what is properly considered political communication and what robust qualitative political communication research can therefore set out to address. Taking promotional culture seriously is one step toward a pragmatic yet critical exploration of how political actors, intermediaries, journalists, and citizens interact in and understand processes of political communication.

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